

VZCZCXRO9005
PP RUEHCN
DE RUEHROV #0057/01 0901549
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 311549Z MAR 06
FM AMEMBASSY VATICAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0291
INFO RUEHOO/CHINA POSTS COLLECTIVE
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN 0319

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000057

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 3/31/2016
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SUBJECT: HOLY SEE'S CHINA NEGOTIATOR "HOPEFUL BUT WITHOUT ILLUSIONS"

REF: (A) BEIJING 5538 (EXDIS), (B) VATICAN 0038, (C) VATICAN 0052, (D) VATICAN
0031, (E) VATICAN 0048
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CLASSIFIED BY: Christopher Sandrolini, Deputy Chief of Mission,
EXEC, State.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. The Holy See's principal China negotiator, Archbishop Celli, described the situation of the Catholic Church in China as complex, with continuing subtle layers of control in key areas. With regard to the bilateral relationship between China and the Holy See, the Vatican remains hopeful but realistic. Celli does not expect to travel to China any time soon. He had praise for USG pressure on China on religious freedom issues and agreed that it has helped. End summary.

¶2. (C) Ambassador Rooney, accompanied by DCM and Special Assistant, called on Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli on March 30. Now the Secretary of the Administration of the Patrimony of the Holy See (an investment fund), Celli was at one time the Undersecretary for Relations with States in the Secretariat of State (i.e., deputy foreign minister). The archbishop, who speaks excellent English, remains the Holy See's point man for negotiations with Vietnam and China. He has played this role for a long time (17 years for Vietnam, 24 years for China); it is discreet but publicly known.

Control over Church is complex

¶3. (C) Celli described China as a place he cares deeply about but added that it is not an easy subject. He was at pains to express the subtlety and complexity of the situation facing the Church in China, which is difficult. The word "control", said Celli, doesn't fully express the reality. The Church can act only with the approval of government, i.e. what is not explicitly permitted is prohibited. He described the government as omnipresent. The government is too image-conscious to close churches or overtly interfere, but Church activities are tightly restricted. China also wants influence over Catholic schools, known as the best in the country, as it is embarrassing for the government to have no role in administering them.

¶4. (C) Religious freedom, linked to human rights, is a critical focus for the Church. Recalling his first visit to China in 1982 -- when it was forbidden to mention the Pope in sermons or print his photograph -- Celli acknowledged that religious freedom there has improved. There are over 4000 churches, 23 seminaries (official, not underground), and an open liturgy, but that does not constitute full religious freedom. Celli described the Patriotic Association as the "long arm" of the government, and said the Vatican remains "full of hope but without illusions".

15. (C) Celli outlined the well-known process of the appointment of bishops; it looks democratic, in that they are "elected", but this masks an elaborate background of control. The Holy See and the GOC are made aware by various means of candidates acceptable to each other, but without any direct consultation; the Holy See then appoints the right candidates and Beijing accepts them. This has happened three times recently, noted Celli, but in the coming years another 40 appointments will need to be made; he wondered whether the present informal and cumbersome arrangement would prove adequate for this volume of appointments. The first test will come soon, as it is now necessary to appoint an aide to Cardinal Zen.

Comments on Cardinal Zen

16. (C) Celli observed that Beijing is not happy with Cardinal Zen, whom he described as "very nice, clever, perceptive, but maybe too outspoken" - being in this sense un-Chinese. China is trying to exert a sophisticated control over democracy. Zen understands this, and the Church is prepared to be patient. However, he hopes it will be possible to articulate a definite time frame - say, 10 or 12 years - as a goal, and, as the ambassador said, as a "roadmap" toward true and unfettered religious freedom. According to Celli, China blames Zen for two big recent demonstrations (presumably those at the time of the WTO ministerial last December) of half a million and one million people; Celli observed that with only 300,000 Catholics in Hong Kong, it's absurd to think a Cardinal could organize something on that scale. China, he said, knows that most of those in the crowd were really there for pro-democracy reasons, but finds it more convenient to treat the matter as a provocation by Zen.

USG Actions

17. (C) The ambassador asked about actions of President Bush during his recent visit to China. Celli said they were "in a sense" positive because he spoke clearly, but China doesn't like to be treated that way; Beijing took notice but wasn't pleased with what it considers foreign interference. Celli said the Holy See appreciates the U.S. expression of interest on

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religious freedom in China. By contrast, "some governments don't care". Note: Celli was slightly less positive than other recent Embassy interlocutors, including a priest from the Patriotic Church, who praised the President's stand more forcefully (reftels). End note.

18. (C) The ambassador noted our impression that China is responding to the points made by the President on religious freedom. Celli commented that judging the number or exact status of priests in detention is difficult. Often they are given a form of house arrest, detained for 2-4 weeks in remote hotels, and made to listen to political arguments, but strictly speaking are not abused. He also cited the government practice of calling some bishops in for "consultations", conceding that "not all bishops respond in the same way". Celli averred that Beijing knows exactly who the underground priests and bishops are, but leaves most of them alone, singling out only a few; he seemed to imply that the ones singled out are the most outspoken. On the other hand, a few months ago one underground bishop was recognized officially, and he was one of the tougher ones. (Beijing wanted him to make a certain statement, the Vatican quietly approved the statement, and all came out well.) So, repeated Celli, the situation is subtle.

Pope to China? Not likely

19. (C) Celli scoffed at the possibility of the pope being invited to China in the next few years, calling it "impossible

at this time". The Church cannot ask for full religious freedom yet, and in any case the government is not in a position to grant it. Using a favorite metaphor, Celli said the Church is like a bird in a cage -- but cages come in different sizes, and he is hoping for a series of larger and larger cages.

¶10. (C) Responding to the ambassador's direct question, Celli said he would be going to China again, but probably not soon. (He was to travel to China last November, but two days before the trip China asked to postpone it.) He clarified his own role by saying that while others (e.g. Cardinal McCarrick) can certainly visit China unofficially, no one but Celli himself would be in a position to negotiate, as the Holy See prefers continuity and this matter will remain in the hands of the Secretariat of State (to whom Celli reports in his role as

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negotiator). Celli suggested that China's recent overtures to Cardinal McCarrick might owe more to his nationality than his Vatican affiliation - i.e., with Hu's Washington visit coming up, it would be politic to be nice to American visitors.

¶11. (C) Celli shared some of his experience in dealing with communist states. When he first visited Vietnam, he was treated in his first session to a 90-minute lecture in Vietnamese on the regime's accomplishments (followed by another 90 minutes of translation). The second session focused on the Holy See's deficiencies - "like a liturgy", joked Celli. He contrasted the clear but flexible guidance given him by the Pope with the rigid negotiating style of the Chinese - though sometimes there is a bit of free talk on the margins, e.g. in cab rides.

¶12. (C) Celli said he'd told Archbishop Lajolo (the Holy See's foreign minister equivalent) that what wouldn't be accomplished in 10 years by China could be accomplished in one week, should the fundamental political decision ever be made; but it's impossible to predict when that might come. He suggested it would require a changing of the old guard, such as the Head of Religious Affairs in the Chinese foreign ministry, who is "always negative". It is almost a generational issue of the old Maoists retiring and ceding power to the young, in his opinion.

¶13. (C) Comment: Celli, sharp as a razor, clearly understood why we wanted to see him - though he was careful to remind us that we should normally remain within regular Secretariat of State channels. Despite the ambassador's direct questions, if he had any inkling of an imminent Chinese opening toward the Holy See (ref a), he did not let on. He did not see any likely breakthrough, whether related to the 2008 Olympics or anything else. Rather, he conveyed a sense of a Beijing regime that, while theoretically able to make the necessary political decision to normalize with the Holy See, in fact finds itself constrained to move very cautiously. Celli was by no means pessimistic, but instead made clear that both sides are prepared for a very gradual process of rapprochement. In this light, we are inclined to see several recent public remarks about the "ripeness" of the relationship, or a possible papal visit - made by the pope, Lajolo, and Celli himself, though anonymously -- more as stalking horses than as harbingers of impending movement.
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